

1656

## HINDSIGHT

## The Mystery of Standish's Remains

By Jody Morgan

During the 19th century, Duxbury residents began to puzzle over exactly what had happened to the earthly remains of Plymouth Colony's first military commander, Capt. Myles Standish. By 1890, when the Reverend E.J.V. Huiginn arrived in the community to serve as the first resident minister at the Protestant Episcopal Church, known today as St. John's, an active search was under way. In his book, "The Graves of Myles Standish and Other Pilgrims," Huiginn lists eight competing traditions describing the site where the Captain was laid to rest.

While some people suggested that Standish had been buried in England, others thought that his grave was in Connecticut, and still others maintained that he had been interred in Plymouth. Five different claims were made for Duxbury locations.

Part of the problem was created by Justin Winsor's 1849 "History of the Town of Duxbury." The general excellence of Winsor's work tends to disguise the areas where the author failed to use all of the primary source material available, especially the Duxbury town records. Most Duxbury scholars were inclined to accept Winsor's statement that "No stone marks the resting-place of his ashes, and we must seek in vain the place where reposes what was mortal of the immortal Standish. He was probably, however, buried on his farm, or perhaps in the old burying-ground in that vicinity at Harden Hill."

The theory that Duxbury's original burying ground was at Harden Hill was supported by the discovery of a few skeletons at that site. Although some residents thought that Harden Hill held an old Native American burial plot, others noted that one of the skulls dug up there had yellow hair. Huiginn suggests that the first criminals executed in Duxbury may have been interred at Harden Hill. One grave held the skeleton of a woman and child, possibly Alice Bushup and her child, for whose murder Alice was put to death in 1648. Another grave might have contained the remains of Thomas Granger, who was hanged in 1642 for confessing to performing unnatural acts with the Brewster livestock.

In any case, had Winsor consulted the

town meeting notes, he would have discovered, as Huiginn did, that the first Duxbury meeting house and the original cemetery that lay beside it were not located at Harden Hill. The record for the meeting of April 3, 1706, reads: "At this meeting the said town agreed and voted to build a New Meeting House, forty foot long and thirty three foot wide and seventeen foot high in the walls, and that the said meeting house shall be set up within three or four rods of the old meeting house now in being." Fortunately, the site of the second meeting house was no mystery.

Of course, the possibility did exist that the structure described as standing in 1706 was not in existence at the time of Myles Standish's death in 1656. He could have been buried on his own farm. But an oral tradition that had come down through several Duxbury families insisted that two pyramidal stones marked the exact location of the Captain's grave. Miss Lucia A.

where free-ranging cattle were providing the only landscape maintenance. "The Society sent a man to repair the fences and clean up the graveyard. Mr. Melzar Brewster did this, and did it well. When at work Mr. Brewster found two stones marking the burial place of Lora Standish; they were covered with sand. Mr. Brewster raised them to the surface in the exact places where he found them."

Myles Standish had left no doubt as to where he wished to be buried. "My will is that out of my whole estate my funeral charges to be taken out, and my body be buried in a decent manner, and if I die in Duxburrow, my body to be laid as near as conveniently may be to my two dear daughters Lora Standish, my daughter, and Mary Standish, my daughter-in-law."

In April 1889, the Rural Society was given permission to examine the grave marked by the three-cornered stones Melzar Brewster had uncovered. The skeleton of a woman and the skeleton of a man were disinterred. The parties present could not agree upon the identification of the remains. Opening the adjacent area in April 1891, Huiginn and Dr. Wilfred G. Brown found only the body of a woman. They obtained permission for a further search.

On May 12, 1891, all of the graves previously opened were examined. Measurements of the skeleton of the man conformed to what was known of Myles Standish's stature. The two female skeletons were of an appropriate age at the time of death to have been Lora Standish and her sister-in-law, Mary Dingley Standish. The position of the graves accorded with the terms of the Captain's will. Finally, the shape of the skulls of both the man and one of the young women bore a remarkable resemblance to the shape of the skull of Standish descendant Caroline Hall, who was present at the exhumation.

Funds were raised in August 1892 to erect an appropriate monument at the grave site. The committee spent all of the \$364 donated. Contributions ranged from 25 cents to \$32.45. The unusual three-cornered stones, which have marked the spot since 1656, were returned to their proper places, for despite what one of Duxbury's most careful historians overlooked, two stones have always marked the resting place of our first military leader.



Two three-cornered stones have marked the resting place of Myles Standish since his burial in 1656.

Bradford, daughter of Capt. Gershom Bradford, further insisted that these stones were somewhere among the weeds in the old cemetery between Hall's Corner and Bailey's Corner.

Miss Caroline Hall, a Standish descendant, had a note written in her family scrapbook by her mother, Ruth Josselyn Hall. According to information given to her by Benjamin Prior, who was born in 1775, Ruth had recorded: "Miles Standish 1660, the first, was buried in the old grave yard. Two three corner stones to his grave."

Reporting on a project that predated his arrival, Huiginn writes that the Duxbury Rural Society had decided to remedy the deplorable condition of the old cemetery,